DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 818 CS 204 966

AUTHOR Vickers, Art
TITLE Language in the Center. Language in the Classroom: A Series. 10.
INSTITUTION Calgary Univ. (Alberta). Faculty of Education.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 31p.; For related documents, see CS 204 957-966
AVAILABLE FROM Language in the Classroom Project, Room 706, EDCI, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada ($1.00 per copy; set of 10, $9.00, enclose payment with order)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Dropouts; *Adult Education Programs; *Case Studies; *Composition (Literary); *Expressive Language; Language Research; Postsecondary Education; Program Content; Teaching Methods; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is the last in a series of ten stemming from the view that language is central to learning, that teachers can gain insights into their work and into learning by examining the language of the classroom, and that current language theory can be the means to such insights. It contains a discussion of some of the theoretical positions that underlie writing, a description of a writing program for adults, several case studies of students in the program, and a discussion of the role of the teacher in such a program. Selections from student writings are included. (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED173818

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Language in the Classroom: A Series. 10

LANGUAGE IN THE CENTER

Art Vickers

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Merron Chorny

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS204966

Published by: Language in the Classroom Project and
Department of Curriculum and Instruction,
University of Calgary

First edition April 1977
© 1977 the Project Team

Titles in the Series

1. Telling, Talking, and Thinking in a Grade Two Classroom
2. Small Group Talk and Reading Comprehension
3. Some Dimensions of Expressive Language
4. Talking, Writing and Learning
5. Students Speak Out
6. A Learning Triangle
7. The Energy of Talk
8. Language Development in the Spectator Role
9. Mediating Science Experience Through Talk
10. Language in the Center

Price: One dollar per copy. Set of ten: nine dollars
Please enclose payment with orders.

Obtainable from: Language in the Classroom Project
Room 706
EDCI
Faculty of Education
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

FOREWORD

This pamphlet is one of a series, produced as discussion papers by a group of teachers who participated in a graduate course in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Calgary. In development, the papers reflect the method of the boys of Barbiana: each paper has been shaped and tempered, through several stages by the input of the group. In intent, the series reflects the aims of the pamphlets originated by the Writing Across the Curriculum Project Team of the Institute of Education at the University of London, to whom we are indebted for pointing the way.

The series stems from a view that language is central to learning, that teachers can gain insights into their work and into learning by examining the language of the classroom, and that current language theory can be the means to such insights. Further, the series represents a conviction that teachers are in the best position to understand the heuristic role of language in the classroom as well as to assess the needs of children in the schools and that they are the most likely to find solutions for problems in classroom practice. To realize this potential and to extend their influence, teachers need to offer their ideas and experiences freely and be willing to consider the ideas of their colleagues openly. It is in this spirit of sharing that these pamphlets are published.

We are grateful to Al Kahanoff, Principal of Branton Junior High School in Calgary for his generous editorial assistance and for his help in seeing the pamphlets through publication.

We also wish to thank Miss Lorraine Cockle for the cover design.

James Britton
Merron Chorny

INTRODUCTION

Each day new books, texts, articles and pamphlets appear which outline new approaches and methods to improve the lot of the English teacher confronted with the problem of teaching students how to write. Within the pages of this pamphlet, however, the reader will find no such formula for success. Rather than glowing success, the reader will meet with the inadequacy, the fear, and the sense of frustration a fellow instructor encounters as he attempts to assist his adult students in becoming more proficient writers.

Teaching students how to write effectively is, perhaps, the most difficult task in English instruction. And each of us approaches this problem in his own way. I have tried, in my work with adults returning to school, to provide teachers with another look at an old problem. My work is based on the research and theories of people deeply concerned with language and its relationship to learning.

However, the theories of Vygotsky, Luria and Ludovich, Kelly and Britton, so briefly discussed here, require far greater study on the part of those deeply intent on broadening their understanding of the full role that language plays in the learning process. Yet, without intimidating the classroom teacher who has limited experience with the theorists, I hope that this work may contain some thoughts relevant to all of us interested in the development of language skills.

With this in mind, I have touched upon some of the theoretical positions which underline writing; I have looked specifically at writing; and finally, I have dealt with some selected case studies about student writers and their writing.

I hope it helps.

LANGUAGE IN THE CENTRE

Although English teachers attempt many things in their classrooms, the task receiving a high priority has always been that of perfecting the spoken and written forms of the English language. Few persons would find fault with such a worthy objective. What fault can be found, may well lie within the methods which we as teachers have employed in bringing about our objectives. In all disciplines teachers may have been too narrow in this regard. Education has been referred to as a 'jug and mug' technique:

> The child is the mug and the teacher is the jug. The jug tips its contents into the mug and that's that. What was in the teacher's mind is now in the child's or rather, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, it is not. [1]

Such teaching has taken no account of the student's past learning, social class or cultural background into consideration. All students were in the classroom to 'learn', and all teachers there to 'teach'. Language was the medium used, but scant attention was paid to its centrality in the learning process.

> .....Thought development is determined by language i.e., by the linguistic tools of thought and by the sociocultural experience of the child...The child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language. [2]

THE THEORISTS

Russian psychology is one of the foundations upon which many modern language theories have been built. Luria and Yudovich summarize the three fundamental propositions upon which Soviet psychology is based:

> .....it regards all mental processes as complex functional formations which are built up as an outcome of concrete forms of interaction between the organism and its environment.

> .....is the introduction of the role of development into study of the formation of mental processes.
>
> .....is the study of the child's mental activity as the outcome of his life in certain determined social conditions.[3]

The work of an earlier Russian psychologist, L.S. Vygotsky, was important for the development of these Soviet propositions. Using much of the current terminology, but breaking with much of what the major theorists of language were saying, Vygotsky showed that by separating thought, language, and speech into their component parts and studying these in isolation, the 'process' by which 'verbal thought' was acquired, was overlooked.

He proposed that until a child reached the age of about two years, there appeared to be no connection between speech and thought. These two components clearly develop from separate genetic roots and as such do not intersect until 'speech begins to serve intellect'. Vygotsky went on to explain that thought and speech can be viewed as two intersecting circles where the area of overlap is the only area where 'verbal thought' occurs. This area is not to be seen as the sector where all thought and speech originate, but only where thought directly influences speech, or where speech directly influences thought.

Verbal thought comes into existence, then, only when a child's 'egocentric speech' begins to affect his actions: it helps the child make corrections in his play. Vygotsky saw the use of egocentric speech as a transitional stage to what he called 'inner speech'. As egocentric speech turns inward, inner speech becomes the major tool for intellectual growth. It becomes the language both children and adults use for mental constructs.

However, children do not develop intellectual growth only through the use of their own inner speech. The importance for children talking with adults is of major importance:

> Language...is included in the process of the child's development from the first months of his life. By naming objects, and so defining their connections and relations, the adult creates new forms of reflection of reality in the child, incomparably deeper and more complex than those he could have formed through individual experience. This whole process of the transmission of knowledge and the formation of concepts, which is the basic way the adult influences the child, constitutes the central process of the child's intellectual development.[4]

Speaking of the direct teaching of concepts, however, Vygotsky tells us that it is 'impossible and fruitless'. What the child actually needs is a 'chance to aquire new concepts and words from the general linguistic context'. This would appear to be borne out by the team who produced the small pamphlet From Information to Understanding.[5] After listening to a small group of boys attempting to internalize the new idea of 'porous rock', they state, "We can't be said to know something until we've made it part of our way of thinking and explored its implications for related areas of knowledge."[6]

This inability to understand new material without first having it related in some way to past experience is important also for understanding James Britton. Speaking of the theories of George Kelly (which Britton incorporates into his own) Britton says:

> .....it is a view of human behavior that makes living very like learning; that equates learning with learning from experience; and that underlines therefore the importance of our present inquiry into the means by which a man brings his past to bear upon his present.[7]

For Vygotsky, Kelly and Britton, then, past experience in the learning process holds a central position. If there is no 'touchstone', nothing with which to relate new information, then the best that can be hoped for is some regurgitation by rote learning of information 'given' to students.

FRIENDLY TALK

In our everyday contact with friends, acquaintances and colleagues we speak of information recently acquired through the reading of books, newspapers, magazines, or from what has been heard on radio or seen on television. From the interchange of talk this information undergoes qualification: either it is confirmed or modified and becomes a part of our storehouse of data, or we reject it — at least for the moment. Our verbal dialogue with others is invaluable for our mental growth and development. In a short article entitled "Their Language and Our Teaching",[8] Britton points to the importance of 'talk in mutual trust' — or what he calls 'expressive speech' — and its importance for individual

development:

> .....it forms, I believe, the first draft of most of our important ideas — and of the important ideas that affect our lives...Secondly, expressive talk is normally the way...we approach other people...It seems to me to follow inevitably that expressive speech is the primary way by which we influence each other. [9]

The importance of the expressive function in language cannot be over emphasized: it is the way we reveal ourselves to others in a personal one-to-one relationship; it is the way we reveal ourselves to each other in a group, and in doing so build a language in common; and it is the way through which we initiate exploration of experience. The latter holds far reaching consequences for the student of language:

> Thus we may suppose that all the important products and projects that have affected human society are likely to have been given their first draft in talk between the originator and someone sufficiently 'in the picture' to hear and consider utterances not yet ready for a wider hearing. Such a listener would ideally concern himself first with the speaker and his thinking, those mental processes that lie behind the utterance; though having 'understood', he might take account also of the forms of the utterance itself and assist in its modification to suit a wider audience. [10]

Through the acceptance of expressive language as a developmental stage in our students' writing, we, as English teachers, can listen, understand, then assist our students in preparing their work to suit a wider audience. For it is through dialogue with students that teachers can assist them in coming to an understanding of new ideas and concepts.

Most psychologists, sociologists and educators have been concerned with language theories in application to the child and adolescent. But how do these theories apply to the adult situation in education? If we take Vygotsky, Luria, Kelly and Britton seriously, as I feel we must, the implication becomes clear: we must begin by attempting to find the touchstone of experience embedded in the minds of our students.

SOME VIEWS ON WRITING

Writing, like any other developed skill, requires a great deal of practice. But practice, without encouragement and constructive criticism, can become a lonesome and futile pursuit. Had the teachers of the great violinist, Fitz Kreisler, never encouraged nor attempted to improve on the quality of Kreisler's first attempts at playing the violin, for example, it is obvious, that despite his talent,the road to fame would have presented this artist with insurmountable obstructions. Like the music teacher who patiently encourages the early attempts of his 'budding' musician, while listening to, and correcting the discordant sound produced, we as instructors of English, need to give our students the opportunity to express their initial discordant sounds in an atmosphere of friendliness and trust, while at the same time, provide the necessary guidance for them to become effective writers.

From the millions who study music seriously, there are but a handful who reach the pinnacle of success. Do we equate from that fact that all those who did not reach stardom are to be considered failures? I should think not. The study of music has provided its students with a great deal of pleasure. They have studied a variety of techniques and methods of musical presentation which can be used in many ways to add to their personal enjoyment, as well as bring pleasure into the lives of those acquainted with them. By the same token, a mere handful of the millions of English students enrolled in our classrooms will possess the talent to become potential Nobel Prize winners for literature. Yet, in providing our students with the techniques of good writing, we can add immeasurably to their personal happiness and social success as well as give a confidence in their ability to use writing competently in practical situations. A great deal of time, however, is necessary for students to become effective writers.

ADULT NEOPHYTES

I teach writing in a special school. It is special in the sense that only adult students are allowed admission. These students range in age from eighteen years to the late fifties. All of them have previously left school for one reason or another. While many may have reached secondary school before becoming

'dropouts', others have a very limited education. All, however, wish to further their education with the hope that it will provide them with better opportunities throughout the remainder of their lives. My basic assumption is that effective writing is a prerequisite for academic success. Therefore, all of my energy in the classroom is directed at assisting my students in the attainment of this complex task.

The greatest proportion of the time spent by my students in the classroom is spent thinking and writing. Whether we deal with the short story, poetry, a personal philosophy, or the drug scene in cities, students must 'come to grips' with the notions and ideas discussed by writing about them. A rough estimate for the division of time spent in the classroom setting would be that for every period spent in discussion, three periods are spent perfecting their writing on that particular discussion.

During the early weeks of each semester, no formal work is turned in by the students for marking. For I have found that adult students approach their first writings in much the same manner as a youngster approaches a musical instrument: he is either afraid of the sound he will produce or has no awareness of his racket whatsoever. Therefore, I refuse to give marks to students who are insecure in or insensitive to their ability and who have not had every opportunity to learn what they can from my teaching.

Another reason for not calling students' work in to be marked rests in my belief that personal comments on students' work is far more effective than a few lines scribbled on the bottom of their writing. This approach requires a great deal of both teacher and student, as it means personal contact with thirty or more students in each class daily. This is difficult, but not impossible. As I walk about the classroom checking their work, I simply state that this or that sentence is poorly constructed, that this is a sentence fragment or that paragraph is improperly developed. Then, I leave them to rewrite their work. To be effective in this style of teaching, my students must, above all else, trust my judgement.

There are, I have found, at least two ways in which a teacher can establish trust: through the acceptance of students' expressive language within the classroom, and by allowing the students the use of self-expression in a daily writing period. Both of these help to establish a mutual trust between teacher and student.

The need for greater acceptance of a student's use of his own expressive speech in the classroom has been emphasized by Britton, Barnes, Martin and others, and to elaborate upon it here would be redundant. The necessity for self-expression in writing for the adult student, however, has apparently not been a matter of high priority for them. Their concerns centered on children and adolescents enrolled in primary and secondary schools, and not upon the writing problems which the adult student confronts when returning to school.

THE SHOCK OF RECYCLING

Returning to the classroom after many years in the labor force is a frightening and frustrating experience for many adults. For most, reading has been limited to the headlines and sports pages of their local newspapers. Their talk has centered on whatever job they were currently engaged in, while their thinking has been mainly the result of emotional upheavals. Experience has taught them to see themselves largely as failures and social outcasts. But their one common 'saving grace' is their desperate desire to escape the conditions imprisoning them. They see education as their liberator.

Although their lack of ability to read well is a hindrance to their learning, it is in the area of written communication where the major stumbling-block to success occurs for the majority of these people.

Developing writing skills, for most of us, has been an arduous task. Hours upon hours of 'verbal thought' produces a paper which is never totally satisfactory for the writer. Yet each of us, as teachers, have had years of practice. How much more frustrating and frightening it must be for adults, who, for years, have not written anything longer than the filling out of an application form for employment!

In speaking with others, we use both verbal and non-verbal means to clarify our message. In the area of verbal speech we use intonation, pitch and inflection, as well as questions, rephrasing and modifying to make clear our intentions. We use facial expressions, body position and hand gestures in the non-verbal area. But when we write, we are stripped of these means and must rely strictly on word choice.

In the past, students learning how to write were subjected to endless drill in writing sentences, paragraphs and essays. The importance of standard English was stressed and reinforced by instruction in grammar through exercises in locating nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phrases and clauses —— to name but a few. Writing was taught for the sake of writing, not for learning. Or as the team of the pamphlet

Why Write?[11] has said,

> .....in schools —— institutes of learning —— the single most important use for writing appears to be as a means of testing, of monitoring knowledge and performance. This writing is seen not as part of the learning process but as something which happens after the learning.[12]

For those of us involved with the direct teaching of writing skills, the findings of the Bullock Report are most important. Of the many suggestions and recommendations found in this report, there is one which holds particular significance for the teacher hoping to improve the writing ability of his students:

> The teacher who aims to extend the pupil's power as a a writer must work first upon his intentions, and then upon the techniques appropriate to them.[13]

To help overcome their fear of written work, students must first be given the opportunity to express themselves on paper knowing that what they say is taken seriously by their reader. For, as the Bullock Report again states,

> A (person) should not be made to feel that it does not pay to take risks. The teacher's first response to a piece of writing should be personal and positive. Only after responding to what has been said is it reasonable to turn attention to how.[14]

At this stage, the writing will tend to be highly tentative, personal, informal; it will be essentially expressive language, from which the teacher will try to guide them to more formal expression.

As stated earlier, adult students find written communication a frightening and frustrating experience. Or as one of my students so aptly put it: "I have a hard time trying to explane things on paper. Spelling and writing I find diffocult and when I have to write something I never know just how to start or what to say." (Joe. Sept. 9/75)

In order to establish trust, and also to assist my students in overcoming their fear of expressing themselves on paper, I established a ten-minute writing period at the beginning of each and every class for the duration of the semester. Students

were told that they could write on any topic they chose without fear of having spelling, punctuation, grammar, or any other mechanics noted. They were told that my remarks would be confined to what they were attempting to say. This approach appears to have validity.

Joe, the student quoted earlier, began his first ten-minute writing with these words:

> My summer was a long hard hall from begening to end. I started work April 14 at hairtage Park as a laborer and one month later I was put to work on the Railroad where I stayes for the rest of the summer. Two others plus myself laid track change ties and reput the train back on the trck.

Yet, twenty days later, telling me of his experience in the Near East, when he was part of the Peace Keeping Force in Cyprus, he writes,

> The castle is high in the mountains over looking the Meadatrainin Sea. On a clear day you can see Turkey. The road going up the castle would make your hair stand on end. The castle over looks a small town called Correna. This town is where the truble started between the Turkes and Greeks in, "1964". It is a Turkish town and the Greeks invaded a small school that is on the north boarder of the town. There were thireteen school kid where hung on meat hooks and skinned alive. The kids that went to this school was nine years old.

The use of a daily ten-minute writing period, where adults are allowed to express themselves in an atmosphere free from the fear of having their work graded, has proved itself to be the most effective tool for improvement of writing skills that I have yet encountered. When these writings are answered by the teacher on a daily basis, the student learns to accept and trust his instructor as a partner in dialogue. Depending, to a great extent, on the experiences encountered in the life of the individual student, trust is established either slowly, over many weeks, or quickly, in a matter of a few days. But regardless of the time involved for the trust factor to become evident, the result is the same: an increase in the student's ability to communicate on paper.

Furthermore, once a trust has been formed, this self-expression can serve other purposes than merely helping students overcome their fear of writing. It becomes an effective way of 'construing and reconstruing' their world of experience. The experiences endured by many adults have not been pleasant, and in order for them

to become successful, socially or academically, much of the 'data in their individual storehouses' must undergo a great deal of change. The dialogue between teacher and student, through the use of the ten-minute writing (when handled with understanding, sensitivity and empathy) can bring about teaching which is both affective and effective.

CASE STUDIES: AN ANATOMY OF WRITERS AND WRITING

Case 1

Name: Anne
Age: 23
Marital Status: Divorced
Dependents: Daughter, age 3

When Anne first came into the classroom she was an extremely shy and backward student who would turn a beet red if I looked in her direction when asking a question of the class. I tried to draw her out slowly in classroom discussions, but to no avail: she did not want to be pressed.

I changed my tactics with her. Rather than approaching her in class, I thought that it might be better to make a connection with her through the ten-minute writings. She was as guarded in her answers there as she was in the classroom, talking only of things which would not expose her to anyone. After we had written back and forth on our views about different aspects of life for a considerable length of time, she suddenly blurted out, in her ten-minuite writing, this exposure of self:

Anne: I really think that I should go to a head shrinker or something. I know that life has its ups and downs, but where does it say that they all have to be downs? I am not trying to get your sympathy but I think maybe you might have a few suggestions as to how to get rid of the blues. I really seem to be having a wonderful case of them lately. One minute I'm up, then in two seconds I'm down. Like a yoyo, all day long. My mornings seem to be all right but by four or five o'clock I'm down as low as I can go. I'm trying to fight it off by keeping busy. That works most of the time. I keep thinking well Anne everything is going really good. What's the matter? Then I think yes everything is alright and nothing is really wrong, I'm doing something wrong somehow or it won't be bothering me.

Teacher: You'll find, Anne, that school (in general) does this to people. All of us (myself included) had this terrible feeling of depression

while we attended school. At times I have a real problem with it yet. There seems to be no easy solution. We all fight it in much the same way that you are now. There are a lot of books around on the subject. Ask your Librarian for a short book on the subject. It may help you. Good luck — and 'hang in there'.

The next day she writes,

Anne: You mean to tell me that everybody feels like me? You don't know how good it feels to hear you write that. I figured I was the only one. Misery loves company so I guess I'd better find some company. That should help me somewhat. Maybe a book from the library would help. I have been trying to get in with some people and start doing some talking. Everyone else is talking but me. Believe me I love to talk but lots of times I'm held back because of old fashioned notions or ideas that keep popping into my head. People are willing to listen to me if I am willing to make an effort. Funny, I always thought that they just didn't want to listen at all.

Teacher: No——if you are willing to contribute to a conversation, you will find most people <u>anxious</u> to listen to your views. Try it.

The following day I got this reply.

Anne: I am willing alright to contribute to any conversation but after 23 years of being shy, it's hard to come out of a mold easily. My parents told me to speak when spoken to; My teachers demanded total silence in class all day. Then bang, one day you're told to stand up and give your view. You don't know where to begin or why you should try to. It is much easier just to sit back and listen to others. But believe me I'm trying and someday people will start hearing me more and more.

And we did. Anne appeared to be a much happier girl as she began to take part in class.

<u>Case 2</u>

Name: Sharron
Age: 27 or 28
Marital Status: Divorced
Dependents: Two children
Occupational Goal: Registered Nurse

At the beginning of the semester, Sharron was, by far, the worst writer that I had in the classroom. The following excerpt is a "translation" of her first attempt at writing for me.

Sharron: Going back to school takes a lots of things combined. Thinking about it is not enough a allow you to want to due it and know what channls too take in order to attain your goal. Meaning that thirs alot of activity involved both mentally and physically. Return back into study and meeting new friends to help on with everything about your school return.

(Sept. 8/75)

Sharron's penmanship was worse than her handling of the English language. Her first writings are difficult for me to decipher even now that I have looked at them many times during the past semester. But later in September she wrote this paragraph:

Sharron: Children are the young, of tomorrows world and should be given every chance to learn about the vast world around them. To learn everything needed to survive in this world takes a lot of devotion from parents and teachers alike. The knowledge needed can be gained through educational shows and toys if they are made available to these young people. Children also need our love and understanding if they are to live in a world of such hate for manking. Give a decent chance to learn today.

(Sept. 19/75)

By this time, Sharron's writing had improved greatly. I was very pleased that she had come so far so fast. Just about the time I had finished patting myself on the back, I received this ten-minute writing from her.

Sharron: English is a great subject to learn and that is why I am taking this course. To date, however, I have not learned a thing. I feel this is due to the fact that a teach has'nt taught anything in regards to writing. I feel that the ten minute writing in the morning is getting me know where because sentence structure is not corrected or marked so I know thers something wrong with the sentence or writing. If there is not a change soon I will be forced to seek help else where.

(Sept. 20/75)

While I was trying to digest this information, Sharron walked into the office with a very determined look on her face. She didn't waste too many words in letting me know why she was there. After letting her 'run down' a little, I pulled her file from the cabinet, turned to her early writings, selected one from the folder, gave it to her and asked if she would read it to me. She almost snatched it from my hand in her indignation. She looked at it, looked at me, then said, "Did I write this?" I assured her that she had. I then took a recent piece of writing from her folder, asked her to read it, and when she had finished we talked about her sentence structure, spelling, handwriting, and some of the other things which

were on her mind. After this aspect of the conversation was over she was told that arrangements would be made for her immediate transfer to another class, if that was her wish. She declined the offer.

Although Sharron never (in five months) became a 'good' writer, she became interested enough in language to offer her services to the student newspaper at the school, and became its assistant editor.

If, as English teachers, we want our students to experiment with language in the hope that they will become proficient in its use, the ten-minute writing is an effective tool in helping bring this about.

Case 3

Name: Lois
Age: 21
Marital Status: Divorced

For the first few weeks, much of Lois' writing followed a rather set pattern. She would even entitle her writings with such things as "The Northern Lights", "Predjudice", "Care of Plants", and "Drugs". The first writing received from her was entitled "Trip Through the Mountains".

Lois: Having never been to B.C. before I decided to take a Greyhound bus through the mountains. I'll never forget that trip.

I got on one of the oldest looking buses at four in the morning in the mist of a downpour. Glad to be out of the rain, I never took a good look around me. But about sixty miles out of town, all of a sudden the air-conditioning started to fill the bus with ice cold air and then die. At that moment I decided that the outside wasn't really an eyesore. For rain was coming in through five or six stuck windows. As the day got warmer things did't seem so bad. Then about forty miles out of Coquitlam the rest room door fell off. Resulting in havoc. Many of the people who had put their seats back could not set them up again. Those sixteen hours will never be repeated even in a limosine.

(Sept. 10/75)

After Lois had been in the class for a period of about three weeks, she dropped the formality of the title and her writing began to take a different direction as well. On October 1st/75, she had this to say.

Lois: In the middle of the Detroit River between Detroit and Windsor is a small tourist island. This island is a man made

island which was formed in 1960 by the Public Relations of the two countries. At the entrance gate is a large sunken battle ship of the Canadian Navy which was brought down from the St. Lawrence River. On this Island is a small zoo and many rides for small children. It takes about two hours by boat from either country, these small boat are scenic crewsers so the trip is enjoyable. During the month of July, for the teenage generation they have rallies and rock concerts into the early hours of the mornings. This is really the only time that the two countries can get together without some form of trouble.

(Oct. 1/75)

A few days later Lois tells of her homesickness.

Lois: When the month of October comes around I get the feeling of homesickness. This has happened for the last three years I've been away from Ontario. Many people never understand it when I just sit and gaze out of the window thinking about all the multi-coloured maple leaves that would be laying in the streets. People, when told that I am homesick for Ontario can't understand why I would rather be there than here. Alberta's nice but if you get used to seeing one sight all your life you can miss it when your away. Here in Alberta when October comes you get the feeling of winter. How I miss the rows of coloured leaves, fruit to be picked. To me this must be the same as the snow on your beautiful mountains. During the month of October I believe its each to their own likes.

(Oct. 14/75)

Two weeks later, she tells me of her appreciation of the course.

Lois: This English class has been the first one that I have been able to understand. Last term having to learn about the parts of grammar I could not comprehend it and I started to dislike English. I know that I came in here the first week being very critical. But now being able to see a difference in my own writing I know that I must have learned something. It is good the way that you talk to us as adults and not as high school students as some of the teachers do. The ten minute writing has helped me to think about topics of my own after being used to having one always given to me.

(Oct. 31/75)

Case 4

Name: Henry
Age: 28
Marital Status: Married with one child
Occupational Goal: Medical Lab Technician

When Henry first began to write for me he attempted to use what I might call textbook language. This was similar to much of the early writings of many of my students. Undoubtedly, there could be many reasons for this. It is my belief, however, that the major reason for this occurence lies with the student's 'sense of audience' which they have had instilled in them by former teachers. In the pamphlet Why Write? the team devised six categories of audience for whom a student could write:

1. child (or adolescent) to self
2. child (or adolescent) to trusted adult
3. pupil to teacher as partner in dialogue
4. pupil to teacher, particular relationship
5. pupil to teacher, seen as examiner or assessor
6. writer to his readers (or his public) 15

Because students see their teachers mainly in the role of 'examiner or assessor', I believe they have a tendency to write in the language they feel their teachers would most accept. Here is Henry's first piece of writing.

Henry:

It has been said that the people living under a communict rule, such as in the U.S.S.R., are much happier and content than those living in a so called democratic society. This in all likely hood is true, as the citizenary of the countries such as the U.S.S.R. have never experienced political social or economical freedom as have the people in the free world. If you don't know freedom you can not miss it or even yearn for it.

All the way from the Czars to the present day dictators, the policy of governmental rule has changed little. The government may assume different names but by in large the tyranny, the threatening and the purge on mennonites has not changed. Rule is attaining strictly by force and maintained by fear. The fear that is inslitled in every Russian citizen has been the basis for their happiness. Because they have succunbed to the wit of a hand full of men it has brought them a sece of security, and security goes a long ways in providing hapinness.

There is just one flaw emerging in the iron curtain. Beginning with Kruschev's foreign policy. The U.S.S.R. is attempting or rather elicting slightly away from Marx's true communism. If this trend continue, quite possible the people of Russia will want to taste the fruit of freedom. (Sept. 8/75)

Henry was one of the students who wanted to know quickly whether his teacher was trustworthy or not. The very next day following this writing he told me how he had met, fallen in love with, and married his present wife.

Following this tender account he writes about his reason for returning to school.

Henry: When I was in my early teens I was a very rebellois person, fighting the establishment every inch of the way. It was because of this attitude that I quite school and went down the road of life learning the hard way what its like to live in an adult world.

I was very fortunate as I went to work in a chemical plant the same day I resigned from academics. It was here that I began to see what was going on around me. There were men doing the same job that they had done for twenty years, growing old and running out of dreams, leaving only a working shell. that seized to enjoy life and the world around them. This sight had quite a shock on me but it didn't clue me in, I felt that this could never happen to me.

the years went by and I found myself working in a hospital, taking care of people who could no longer manage on their own. It was in, this atmosphere, that I received my education on life and I learned the extent of human suffering. To watch young and old alike wither and to often die was a harsh leason but well worth learning.

(Sept. 10/75)

Over the next few weeks we discussed a variety of experiences common to us both. When he felt comfortable that I would accept his language, he asked if it would be alright if he could begin to write some continuous stories. I told him that I would be delighted if he would try them. From that point until the end of the semester, Henry wrote stories. Much of his prose was well written when a person considers the short time that he had to develop it. Ten minutes does not give a person very much time to think through what it is he may wish to say. The following is a short excerpt taken from one of his last entries.

Henry: Bert arrived at his new home late in the evening, the still clear air of the warm summer night filling his lungs. The faint aroma of sweet, green vegetation tingled his nostrils, arousing his senses. Never in all his life could he recall when he felt so at peace with himself and the world. This he felt was sure to be the most rewarding chapter in his so far, empty and restless existence. Although he had only stood on his land but a few minutes, he knew he was home.

Home, the very word made his inner self dance with joy. He now knew how his fellow travellers felt when they talked about their homes. To Bert it had meant nothing until the moment he arrived on his farm.

(Jan. 12/76)

Henry was now writing for a much wider audience.

Case 5

Name: Ralph S.
Age: 21
Marital Status: Single

Ralph had many writing problems when he entered the class. Although he was not to become, what one might call, a truly effective writer, he improved a great deal in the course of the five months he was in the class. Early in the year Ralph wrote this.

> There are thousands of people starry around the world today and some people don't really care. I have worked in a Drive Inn restrunt where they are throwing perfectly good food away just to make sure the customer is satisfied. The reason this food is throw away is because it has sat in the warming place for more than ten minutes. People should stop thinking of themselves for just one minute and start thinking of other less forcenate people around the world. Resturants should not be able to serve food in such a manner.
>
> (Sept. 10/75)

Ralph had a great deal of difficulty clearing these many faults from his work, but through diligent application and the ten minute writing period he was able to overcome a great majority of them. By mid-January he was capable of a much freer style, although there were still some spelling errors in the writing.

Ralph:

> I was just in to see Mr. M., third floor department head, to find out what courses I'll be taking next semester. There was a big misunderstading on what couses I needed. Someone put me down for only one class next semester and I understand that you have to pay 64.00 for each cours that is taken if you don't get sponsored. And from the way things were turning out I would have to start paying fees. If I hadn't gone to see him, I probabley wouldn't have been excepted next term. I wish the office would let students know whats happening to their time tables before its to late. It could ruin the students chance of making their goals.
>
> (Jan. 13/76)

And one week later he wrote,

> Foreign cars can be very expensive to operate. I own a foreign car which is manufactured in Germany. In the past few

months I've been having a lot of problems with it. The front end on this car has to be replaced and it's going to cost me a bundle. I also realized that if parts are'nt available in Canada, the dealership has to order them from Europe, in which case it could take up to three months to arrive. After waiting this length of time, you find out that the part you have ordered is a very expensive item. I think the next time I purchase a car it will be a Canadian built car rather than a foreign car.

(Jan. 20/76)

While many students do not appear to have difficulties controlling their personal lives, others enter the classroom with feelings of anger, frustration and fear, which, if left unexpressed, serve as effective barriers to learning. The ten-minute writing period allows the latter group to rid themselves of many of the emotional upheavals they are facing. And in answering their concerns the instructor has the opportunity to modify, or change, some of the negative attitudes detrimental to learning.

Case 6

Name: Jean
Age: 25
Marital Status: Separated
Dependents: boy, age 6
Occupational goal: R.N.

Jean's early writings consisted mainly of 'scratch' marks. She would begin to write, draw pen marks through it, begin again, and do the same thing. Consequently, I was unable to get legible work from her for the first while. Finally, after I had spent an unsatisfactory three weeks in attempting to draw her out politely with my remarks on her work, I simply wrote, "Okay, so now you can go back to writing your own thoughts in your own words." The next day I received the following:

Jean: He's rather an insignificant looking bear. His once fluffy two toned brown fur has been almost completely worn of by five years of cuddling and abuse. He's been sewn innumerable times with a variety of different colours of thread, to save his foam stuffing from falling out. His two little green glass eyes are on the verge of being replaced by two plastic shirt buttons. He goes by the name of Thomas, a label given as soon as his young companion could speak. He cannot be replaced,for the older and more ragged he becomes, Thomas becomes that much more important to the child whom he has helped for some years to get through a long and lonely night.

(October 2/75)

Two weeks after the receipt of this letter, Jean pleads for understanding:

> It's five o'clock, and time for the shift to start. The first of an endless number of pots of coffee gets made. Sipping at a cup of the awful brew, wondering how much abuse is going to be dished out tonight along with the steaks and pizzas, I notice the first customers come in. Putting on a false smile I take two menus to them wishing they'd have chosen some other restaurant to eat in. I give them sufficient time to argue about what they want to eat, and go to take their order. I stand there patiently taking down the details, more concerned with wether or not my son is alright than what they want to eat. The rest of the night goes much the same way, with the clearing and setting of tables and the gritting of teeth all a part of it. Three thirty comes and at last I can start washing the last of the dishes and vacuuming the run, with this all done I fall into the front seat of the car to go home, wondering all the way there how I'll possibly cope tomorrow.
>
> (Oct. 14/75)

Indeed, how might any of us 'cope with tomorrow' under similar conditions?

The receipt of this writing was the first warning I had that Jean faced problems of a magnitude which could destroy stronger people. I was to learn much about this young woman. At times she wrote of the frustrations she encountered as a mother; sometimes of the horrible guilt of being an alcoholic (and unable to control it); while at other times she expressed her fear of being the mother in a one-parent family, to a child she loved dearly. In December I received the following writing:

"This is for my Son"

> I know there are times that I've let you down, and in more ways than one. Times when I should have been with you when you were with a baby sitter because I was out on a date. The men that have not only been a hurtful part of my life, but yours too. The things you miss out on because you don't have a full time father, like hockey and Saturday afternoon baseball games. Being a single parent is not easy for me nor is it easy for you being the child of a single parent. Sometimes when I yell at you or punish you for trivial things it's because I'm in a bad mood or I had a bad day, or I was out too late the night before or I just wish I had someone to share you with. You know that I love you more than anyone or anything, but unfortunately sometimes that isn't enough or at least I don't feel like it is. Maybe someday when you have children of your own you'll realize that my short comings are only those of a person trying as hard as possible to make a good life for another person. To share the good times and to help you through the bad, to help you understand right from wrong isn't always a simple task. I guess what I'm trying to say is bare with me through the hard times and all the mistakes I'll make with you and my own

life too because I love you and though it may not seem like it to you I am doing my very best for the both of us.

(Dec. 1/75)

Although teachers are not expected to take on burdens of this complexity, it is obvious that if Jean did not receive help, the consequences for her might well be disastrous.

I had Jean come into the office where we could talk privately. After all the frustrations and fears had been expressed and the tears shed, I asked her for her consent to take her writings and herself to the head of the Counselling Services where I could save her the trauma of explaining all of this a second time to a stranger. She agreed to my proposal. Jean failed her last term, but with the help of Counselling Services and one other teacher, we were able to assist her through a very difficult period in her life. Though not a success academically, she was provided with the time necessary to make an adjustment in her personal life whereby she could deal rationally with her situation. She is still currently enrolled in the institution and doing well both socially and academically. Not always are we so fortunate.

Case 7

Name: Trudy
Age: 20
Marital Status: Single

For the first few weeks of the semester, Trudy contented herself writing short stories during the ten-minute period. In my opinion, they were extremely well done as well as being a pleasure to read. Some of the stories had some rather gruesome endings, but Trudy appeared to be in good health and spirits. Early in November, however, she wrote a very unusual story.

Trudy: Angela hesitated, her finger on the hole of the last number she was telephoning. Taking a deep breath, she released it, letting the dial slowly tick around until it stopped. A lump caught in her throat.

"Could I speak to the doctor. It's somewhat urgent."

There was a silence before the stern male voice of her psychiatrist answered.

"Doctor", she started, Somethings come up that I need your say on."

"Well, Angela," he slowly drawled, "I'm awfully busy. Why don't we make it on the tenth at two-thirty five? That's fine isn't it?"

"Alright," she sighed, the gloom mounting from and gushing at the edges.

"Well," he drawled again, "Is it anything that you could say over the phone?"

"Yes, I'm pregnant."

"Well, of course you'll have to have a theraputic abortion. Have you had a pregnancy test?"

"Yes. I want to keep it." she answered.

"I can have the O.R. reserved on Tuesday. You can notify your parents." The Doctor pulled out his schedule and scratched on a pad of paper.

"OK". She answered, "I'll tell them. I want to keep it."

For the first time he heard her. "You can't."

(Nov. 2/75)

The day following this story, she wrote this:

Trudy: The crystal splinters of my heart shattered upon the hardness of destiny. To adjust, and to learn an empty nothingness as a pattern of being, was hollow, lonely, and often painful. But the exasperation of having the cavity within me filled with the warmth of hope, only to find that I would lose it again, was more than my sanity could take. The sobbing swelled within me as I screamed a silent, useless cry for help. No one listened. No one heard. Fate had once more closed the door in my face.

(Nov. 3/75)

I responded to this writing by saying, "Trudy, if ever you wish to talk with me, please do. I sure hope that I never say —— 'I 'm too busy!". But that was hardly the reply she needed at that time. She did not return after the Christmas break. She had attempted to communicate her need to me in the only way she knew how, and I had failed to understand her message. And there was no happy ending.

When we are asked the question, "Why do you feel English is an important part of the curriculum?" many of us have answered, "Because English <u>is</u> life!" We like to point out that the study of Shakespearean Drama, Modern Plays, the Short Story, the Novel and Poetry all help to enlarge and enrich the life of the reader. I wonder, at times, if we don't become so involved in the life of the character we are studying, and in the 'message' of the poets we love to praise, that we forget about the drama unfolding in the lives of our students?

The Role of the Teacher

As students discover that an instructor cares about their feelings, problems and frustrations, they begin to experiment with different language functions with more mature writing. They become interested in discussing 'the way they feel about the world', or involve themselves in writing about 'the way the world is'. The former, James Britton has described as "poetic"; the latter, "transactional". Rarely, in the ten-minute writings, is there evidence of either the purely poetic or purely transactional. It would better be described as a move towards the one or the other. However, the fact remains that there is a developmental change in students writing when they are permitted the opportunity to experiment. And this change, to a large degree, is reflected in the attention students give to form and logic.

It would be misleading and deceitful to have my readers believe that the attention students give to form and logic was self-developed over a period of five months, and came about only through the use of the ten-minute writings. Although one of my primary objectives is to gain the trust of my students (and the writings are a 'tool' I use to help bring this about) this trust is actually subservient to my work as an English instructor. And this leads us to the question, "How do I see my role as an instructor in English?"

As I pointed out earlier, the major stumbling-block to success for adult students is their inability to communicate effectively in written form. I see my role, therefore, as one of assisting students in developing their own style of writing. And because the majority of these people are hoping to further their education I attempt to lead them towards writing which will pay attention to form, and be logically developed. That is the major thrust of my effort in the classroom. Without the use of the ten-minute writing period, however, I feel much of what I am attempting to do would be wasted. For, as students begin to understand the function of writing: that it is a unique means for their own exploration as well as of communication; as they perceive that their teacher truly cares about whether or not they are successful in life, and realize the importance of clearly developed written communication as a means of attaining their goal, they want to write in an acceptable manner. After a month in class,

one of my students put it this way:

Clint: Lately I have found that I'm starting to enjoy writing. There are still many problems that I have to over come in my attituide towards writing and English. But I feel I have learn more in the space of a month than any other time I have study. I still find that I have a hard time getting thought in order but when I do it seem that I cannot express myself as full as I want.
Could you point out something that would help me in getting my thoughts in order.

(October 8/75)

The need for greater clarification which Clint expresses was very common, both in the classroom and in the ten-minute writing. Without the students' trust, however, I don't believe I would have had the direct influence I wanted upon their written work. And, mainly, this trust was established through the use of the ten-minute writings and the acceptance of expressive language as a key to further development.

When students reach the point where they <u>feel</u> their written language is inadequate to express themselves properly, and ask sincerely for help, then teachers can use this motivation to intervene upon the students incorrect use of language. Spelling, punctuation, capitalization and omission errors can be noted on their work. Teachers can show their students why mechanical errors inhibit the clarity of expression. And, as the semester progresses, instructors can point out the importance of sentence structure, proper methods of paragraph development, and the need for logical order and unity,without totally destroying both the will and the good will of the students involved.

We, as teachers, have worked long and hard to develop our writing skills, and yet we fail miserably at times when attempting to communicate our meaning to others. Yet, in many cases, we expect our students to learn this complex task in a few short months. In schools where the theories discussed in this paper were applied over years, there is little doubt that writing skills could be developed to a high degree of competency. However, when an instructor is working with people who have not written in years, the students' plight must be taken into consideration. Far too often, I am afraid, it is not.

As each of us seeks ways to put the theories we study into practice, we will make many mistakes. But theories remain in the realm of the ideal unless we are willing to apply them. Old methods have appeared to fail many modern day

students, and young men and women are being wasted as a result. The common complaint amongst the adult students is that their former teachers simply did not care. Surely, then, it is time to use methods and theories, where teachers do care, theories based on trust. For as Martin Buber describes it,

> Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists — that is the most inward achievement of the relation of education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness, however hardpressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth. Because this human being exists, in the darkness the light lies hidden, in fear salvation, and in the callousness of one's fellow men the great Love.[16]

Notes

1) James Britton, "Their Language and Our Teaching", English in Education, Summer, 1970, p. 6.

2) L.S. Vygotsky, Thought and Language (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1962) p.51.

3) A.R. Luria and F. la Yudovich, Speech and the Development of Mental Processes in the Child. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Inc., 1973) pp. 21-22.

4) Op Cit: pp. 1-8

5) Nancy Martin, From Information to Understanding. (London: Writing Across the Curriculum: Schools Council, 1974) p.13.

6) Ibid

7) James Britton, Language and Learning. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972) p.18.

8) James Britton, "Introduction", Talking and Writing, ed. by James Britton (London, England: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1967) p. xiii.

9) Ibid

10) James Britton, "What's the Use?", Language in Education. (London, England: The Open University Press, 1972) p.246.

11) Nancy Martin, Why Write? (London: Writing Across the Curriculum: Schools Council, 1973) p.5

12) Ibid

13) The Bullock Report. Chapter 11, p.164.

14) Ibid: Chapter 11, p.167.

15) Nancy Martin, Why Write?

16) Martin Buber, as quoted by James Britton in Language and Learning. p.185.

Bibliography

Barnes, Douglas, James Britton and Harold Rosen. Language, the Learner and the School. (Markam, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd.) 1974.

Britton, James. Language and Learning. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd.) 1972.

Editor. Talking and Writing (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.) 1972.

Bernstein, Basil. Class, Codes and Control. (Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.) 1971.

Cashdan, A. and Elizabeth Grugeon. Editors. Language in Education. (London and Boston: The Open University Press) 1972.

Creber, Patrick. Lost for Words. (Markam, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd.) 1974.

Jones, Anthony and Jeremy Mulford. Ediotrs. Children Using Language. (London, England: Oxford University Press) 1971.

Livia, A.R. and F. la Yudovich. Speech and the Development of Mental Processes in the Child. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Inc.) 1973.

Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich. Thought and Language. (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press) 1962.